Statue of Liberty goes into ShowBiz

John Slania

With people drowning in coins, T-shirts and other Statue of Liberty bric-a-brac, ShowBiz Pizza Time Inc. wanted to do something "dignified" for the statue's centennial anniversary. It decided to book Lady Liberty on stage with Billy Bob, Fatz, Mitzi and its other furry robot characters.

In a mix of patriotism and pepperoni, ShowBiz is placing a Statue of Liberty robot in each of its 170 restaurants nationwide, timing the promotion with this summer's rededication ceremonies in New York.

Standing six feet tall, the molded foam rubber figures are authentic in detail right down to their green coloring. Computer-programmed to carry out a series of movements, the "animatronic" statues will join familiar singing and acting ShowBiz characters in a salute to America.

Public reaction will be available for the first time Friday when the promotion breaks in a national television campaign. ShowBiz executives believe people will find the product palatable.

"WE DEFINITELY wanted to do it in good taste. We didn't want anything corny," said Jul Kamen, cosmetic support manager at ShowBiz's headquarters in Dallas.

To complete the task, ShowBiz turned to Creative Presentations Inc., an animation designer based in Schaumburg. A contract called for the production of the animatronic statues, writing a theatrical stript and designing computer programming.

Creative Presentations was no stranger to the work. The company develops animatronic characters and threatrical presentations for the theme park industry, retail Christmas displays and trade shows. Its diverse customer base includes Busch Gardens, Six Flags Great America, Carson Pirie Scott & Co., Abbott Laboratories, Motorola Inc. and Tommy Bartlett's Robot World.

Yet the project was the largest undertaking in the company's 17-year history, said company president Gene Bullard. Not only did it require producing 170 statues, but it also called for the conversion of an existing character, a furry beast called "Rolfe De Wolfe."

THE MASS production of statuesque anatomical parts to replace hairy arms and legs came to be something of a "Jekyll and Hyde" project, Bullard said.

"It was difficult making the transition from a cartoon character to the Statue of Liberty. We wanted to maintain the dignity of the Statue of Liberty as a national figure," Bullard said.

Commissioned for the job in March, Creative Presentations worked with Kamen in designing a prototype. There was some debate about how the character should look, but authenticity won out.

"The only thing we did was give her a little more of a smile," Kamen admitted. But it was only done to protect ShowBiz's young clientele. "The Statue of Liberty can be pretty scary looking when you really start looking at her. She's a pretty mean looking lady," Kamen said.

The statue was also designed without a moving mouth, as Creative Presentations thought any interaction with the regular ShowBiz performers would detract from her character. "The worse thing that could happen was that she became part of the gang," Bullard said.

With the prototype completed, the company had four weeks to produce statue parts that could be conveniently shipped and easily assembled. "It had to be of good quality, plus it had to quick and easy for a non-technical person to change an existing figure," said Steve Stack, executive vice president, who supervised design and production.

At the same time, creative director Frank Gaughan was busy writing and producing dialog and music for Liberty's tribute to America. Gaughan searched through 70 patriotic songs before coming up with the half dozen tunes used in the 15-minute show. The songs were recorded by studio singers backed up by 12 members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

THE MOST difficult element in writing the show once again came down to dignity, Gaughan said. "How do you put the Statue of Liberty in with a bunch of cartoon characters?" he asked.

The answer comes near the end, when spotlights blaze on a closed curtain and the Statue of Liberty comes forward in a stately manner. Lady Liberty gracefully turns her head to the audience and shifts the tablet in her left arm while music plays softly in the background. The show closes with a solemn female voice echoing words from "The New Colossus," the Emma Lazarus poem enscribed on the original Statue of Liberty's pedestal:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...i."

"When you see the whole show," Stack said, "you get goose bumps."

Don't get the impression that ShowBiz is entirely swept up in patriotic fervor. While it lets freedom ring, it also hopes its cash registers will ring.

ShowBiz spent $250,000 on the promotion, Kamen said. The company, with $217 million in sales last year, hopes the show will increase receipts by at least 2 percent, or about $4.3 million, Kamen said. If the promotion works, she said it may lead to further character conversions.

"We not only wanted a change, we wanted to generate business," Kamen said. "We thought of licensing a Transformer character. But we wanted something lasting. The Statue of Liberty was the way to go."

Herald photo

SHOWBIZ PIZZA is offering a taste of patriotism by adding a robotic Statue of Liberty to its shows. Creative Presentations Inc. in Schaumburg designed the moving statue with the help of mechanical designer Ralph Millard and costume designer Patti Whitmore.

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